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THOMAS GRAY'S INTEREST IN CELTIC

It would appear from the number of the recent books on the Romantic movement that to modern students of eighteenth-century English literature the subject of chief interest is the gradual change from neo-Classicism to Romanticism—whatever those terms may mean. And practically all the critics, however much they differ on definitions, will agree that the Romantic spirit found almost perfect expression in the Norse and Welsh poems of Thomas Gray. The question of Gray's ability to read Old Norse has now been argued back and forth until it is finally settled;¹ the impetus given to the Romantic movement by his "Fatal Sisters" and "The Descent of Odin" has been investigated with the utmost care; yet, strangely enough, only the most superficial attention has been given to his Welsh poems. That there was an important Celtic revival in England a hundred and fifty years ago is a fact with which everyone is familiar, but the importance of Gray's part in the movement has been sadly neglected.² If any justification were needed for examining minutely this single phase of the great scholar's activity, one might plead that the most distinctive feature of our own literature today is, indeed, a new Celtic revival, marked by the writings of Synge, Fiona Macleod, and Yeats. But quite apart from this striking parallel, whatever concerns Thomas Gray is bound to be of some interest. It is in the hope of answering two important questions, at least more fully than has yet been done, that the present article is written. These questions are: To what extent did Gray investigate Celtic literature and the history of Druidism? and, How much influence did he exert on the eighteenth-century writers of Celtic-English poetry?

¹ E. W. Gosse, *Life of Gray*, pp. 160 ff.; G. L. Kittredge, *Gray's Knowledge of Old Norse*; C. H. Nordby, *The Influence of Old Norse Literature*, p. 5; F. E. Farley, *Scandinavian Influences in the English Romantic Movement*, p. 35, note 2; D. C. Tovey, *Gray's English Poems* (Pitt Press, 1898), p. 239, corrected in the 1911 edition.

² Mr. Tovey (Pitt Press edition, pp. xv-xvi) has touched on the matter briefly. The relation of Gray to the Welsh poet Evan Evans has been examined by Professor W. Lewis Jones, for a short criticism of whose article see note 2, p. 8, below.

I. SOURCES OF GRAY'S INFORMATION

In the first place there are several works dealing with early Celtic history, Druidism, and Welsh poetry, of which we definitely know Gray made use. Among the more important of these are the following:

Caesar. To the account of Druidical customs given by Caesar [*De Bello Gallico* vi. 13-18] Gray specifically refers in his correspondence with Mason.

Tacitus. Likewise referred to familiarly in the letters to Mason. Of numerous passages about the Druids, Gray probably had in mind the *Annals* xiv. 29-30.

R. Hygden: [*Polychronicon*], cited in one of Gray's own notes to "The Bard," 1768 edition.

Sir John Price: *Defensio Historiae Britannicae* (London, 1573), mentioned in Gray's essay "Gothi" (*Works*, ed. T. J. Mathias, 1814, II, 105).¹

William Camden: [*Britannia*]. A tremendously popular work, first published in 1586, containing much information about the Druids. Gray, who cites the work in his notes to "The Bard," probably knew the English translation published by Edmund Gibson; of this four editions appeared between 1695 and 1772.

John David Rhys: *Cambrobrytannicae Cymraecaeve Linguae Institutiones* (London, 1592). Gray's chief interest in Rhys's grammar concerned the discussion of Welsh prosody. To this treatise we find two references in his MS essays (*Works*, ed. Mathias, II, 25 and 51); in the second case he was quoting from Carte's *History of England*, but while Carte failed to cite the page of Rhys's work, Gray looked the reference up for himself and noted "p. 146."

William Stukeley: *Stonehenge, a Temple Restored to the British Druids* (1740); and *Abury, a Temple of the British Druids, with Some Others, Described. Volume the Second* (1743). The two volumes together constitute the popular but unscholarly work on Druidism of which Gray wrote so scathingly² (*Letters*, ed. Tovey, II, 28-29).

¹ This essay is not included by Mr. Gosse in the standard four-volume edition of Gray; hence the necessity of citing Mathias' edition. It is a most unfortunate omission, for the few pages give much evidence of Gray's reading and, incidentally, confirm Professor Kittredge's conjecture that Gray did know Verelius' edition of the *Hervarar Saga* (see *Gray's Knowledge of Old Norse*, p. xlv).

² Gray wrote that a certain pamphlet was "nonsense, and that nonsense all stolen from Dr. Stukeley's book about Abury and Stonehenge." In recognizing the unscholarly nature of Stukeley's antiquarian researches, Gray was far ahead of his time. For many years the Doctor was looked up to as the greatest English authority on Druidism, but in reality his books have no value whatever. He was completely taken in by Macpherson's *Ossian*, which he said confirmed all his most important archaeological discoveries (see *A Letter from Dr. Stukeley to Mr. Macpherson, On his Publication of Fingal and Temora*, London, 1763); also by the *De Situ Britanniae* attributed to Richard of Cirencester, now known to be a forgery by Bertram.

- Thomas Carte: *History of England*. Vol. I (1747) contains a discussion of Druidism, as well as an article by Lewis Morris on Welsh poetry from which Gray made long extracts for his own essay "Cambri" (*Works*, ed. Mathias, II, 50 ff.). Vol. II (1750) gave Gray the story of the massacre of the Welsh Bards by Edward I, the source of his ode "The Bard."¹
- Abbé Fénel and Nicholas Fréret: Two articles on Druidism by these authors appeared in Vol. XXIV of the *Mémoires de l'Acad. des belles lettres et des inscriptions*. Gray read them both and gave Mason a synopsis (*Letters*, ed. Tovey, II, 26-27).
- Simon Pelloutier: *Histoire des Celtes* (La Haye, 1750). Gray had read both volumes by January, 1758, when he sent Mason a brief criticism (*Letters*, ed. Tovey, II, 22).
- J. B. B. d'Anville: *Notice de l'ancienne Gaule tirée des monumens romains* (Paris, 1760). This valuable treatise Gray had in his own private library.²

With these works, as has been said, we are sure Gray was familiar. And it would be absurd to suppose that his reading on Celtic subjects was limited to this list or to anything like it; general a priori considerations, combined with his nonchalant yet accurate criticisms of Stukeley and Pelloutier, show that he was probably equally familiar with the standard treatments of Druidism by Humphrey Lhuys,³ Rowlands, Toland,⁴ Borlase, and other noted Celtists. Unfortunately his intense aversion to annotating his poems, as well as the belittling way in which he always wrote in his letters of his own researches, makes it a matter of mere conjecture.⁵ We may, how-

¹ See note 1, p. 9, below.

² See Charles Wright's *Catalogue, briefly descriptive, of various books, and original manuscripts, of the poet Gray* (London, 1851).

³ Gray could hardly have overlooked Humphrey Lhuys's treatise *De Mona Druidum Insula*, for it is included at the end of Price's *Defensio* in the London edition of 1573, 4to, to which Gray specifically refers.

⁴ Even Mason, with his "no reading," was familiar with John Toland's delightful letters on Druidism, which were published posthumously in *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Toland* (1726), I, 1-228. Mason cites Toland in his notes to *Caractacus*, in support of a passage which Gray (*Letters*, ed. Tovey, I, 361 and note) "always admired."

⁵ When Gray published "The Progress of Poesy" and "The Bard" in 1757, he wrote to Walpole: "I do not love notes, though you see I had resolved to put two or three. They are signs of weakness and obscurity. If a thing cannot be understood without them, it had better not be understood at all." With the first poem he gave no annotations whatever; with "The Bard," four, none of which supplies any information about his Celtic reading. And when the public failed to understand him, he wrote in glee to Mason: "I would not have put another note to save the souls of all the owls in London. It is extremely well as it is—nobody understands me, and I am perfectly satisfied." In the 1768 edition he grudgingly added a few more, with the following advertisement: "When the Author first published this and the following Ode, he was advised, even by his

ever, be sure that he derived further information from another source—his wide circle of learned friends.

One of the most interesting of these friends was John Parry, the blind harper who inspired Gray to finish "The Bard." Parry was a famous character in his day and a great friend of the Welsh antiquary and poet, Lewis Morris. At present he is still familiarly spoken of in Wales as "Parry Ddall," and by lovers of music he will always be remembered for his three volumes of Welsh airs.¹ If not from Rhys's grammar, then it was perhaps from Parry that Gray came to understand something of the Welsh system of *cynganedd*, which he occasionally reproduces in "The Bard."² Another noted Welsh poet of the time was Evan Evans, whose influence on Gray was so great that it seems necessary to devote a separate section to it in this discussion. Then, too, there is the fact that by 1762 Gray was sufficiently interested in Welsh poetry to solicit the pleasure of corresponding with Lewis Morris himself,³ and Morris was everywhere

Friends, to subjoin some few explanatory Notes; but had too much respect for the understanding of his Readers to take that liberty." The same reticence to discuss his own Celtic studies characterizes all his letters save those in which he was helping Mason with *Caractacus*.

¹ *Ancient British Music*. . . . Part I (1742); *A Collection of Welsh, English, and Scotch Airs, with Variations, Part II* (n.d.); *British Harmony, being a Collection of Ancient Welsh Airs*. . . . Part III (1781).

² *Cynganedd*, while almost equivalent to the English word "consonance," is technically used by the Welsh poets to include both consonance and certain varieties of rhyme; so no satisfactory translation is possible. It would, of course, be unwise to assume that Gray ever mastered the fourteen intensely complicated types of *cynganedd* but there are several lines in "The Bard" that reproduce the effect fairly well, and one that furnishes an absolutely perfect example of *cynganedd draws acennog*:

Weave the wárp (and) weave the woóf.
 ₁ ₂ ₃ ₄

An examination of Gray's poems shows that he used alliteration much more freely in "The Bard" than elsewhere, and it seems clear that by the use of these peculiar consonantal harmonies he was seeking to suggest a metrical system foreign to English poetry. Many Welshmen have attempted to use *cynganedd* in English verse, but few have succeeded in producing poems of any dignity which conform strictly to the rules. The English language is so completely lacking in anything corresponding to the Welsh systems of inflection, initial mutation, and *sandhi*, that the result is almost unattainable. Had Gray reproduced the effect more perfectly, "The Bard" would necessarily have been a less successful poem.

³ *The Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris, of Anglesey*, recently edited and published by Mr. J. H. Davies, contain a surprising amount of information on the interest which English men of letters took, about the middle of the eighteenth century, in Welsh literature. Although there is no mention of Lewis Morris in any of Gray's extant letters, the fact that he did at least solicit his correspondence is evident from the following reference:

WILLIAM MORRIS TO RICHARD. OCTOBER 14, 1762

"In the letter I had from him [Lewis] before, of the 16th August he gave me a list of the greatest critics now in Britain who desire to correspond with him about British affairs;

acknowledged to be the greatest living authority on Welsh literature. Finally, we know that Gray used to confer on matters of Celtic interest with another antiquary, whose labors in this field have been little commented on—no less a person than Bishop Percy.¹

The facts just given, while not very astonishing, go to show that Gray was more than a superficial student of Celtic antiquity. From the time when he began writing "The Bard" he seems to have taken a keen interest in Celtic mythology, with special reference to its use in English poetry. The outline of his projected history of English poetry shows that he was among the first to realize how great is our indebtedness to the literature of the Celts; as a writer of Celtic-English verse he was a pioneer among the early Romanticists; and the depth of his scholarship made his criticism invaluable to the poets who followed his example.

II. GRAY AND MASON

As Gray's own "Bard" and his metrical versions of Welsh poems are too well known to need comment here, we may turn at once to a consideration of his share in William Mason's great dramatic poem *Caractacus*. *Caractacus* may be called a wholly Celtic production;² the subject is from Celtic history; the setting is Celtic; and a distinctly Celtic atmosphere is created by the introduction of Druidism,

it seems they are all Briton mad! Eu [h]enwau yw [i.e., their names are] Messrs. Pegge, Lye, Percy, Hurd, Shenstone, Grey [sic], Mason."

This letter is to be found in Vol. II, p. 511. See also *ibid.*, p. 514, for confirmation. Mr. Davies, to whom I am indebted for pointing out this item, has also called my attention to Gray's friendship with Michael Lort, Greek professor at Cambridge from 1759 to 1771. That Professor Lort corresponded frequently with the Morrisises and was deeply interested in Welsh poetry, is perfectly clear (*ibid.*, pp. 537, 544, 555, 557, 565). It may be added that his mother was Welsh.

¹ To Bishop Thomas Percy is due much of the credit for the appearance of Evan Evans' *Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* (1764). Percy began to write to Evans in July, 1761, and from then until at least 1776 the two men corresponded regularly on the subject of literature. Over thirty of the letters are still preserved in the British Museum (Additional MS 32,330), yet they seem to have been wholly overlooked by historians of the Romantic movement. When Evans' volume of *Specimens* was reprinted at Llanidloes in 1862, a few of the letters, by Percy, were included as an appendix. Though very carelessly transcribed, they throw a great deal of light on the beginnings of Romanticism. The remainder of the correspondence, equally valuable, has never been published. While Evans was writing his book, Percy advised, encouraged, and criticized; he acted as a go-between for Evans and Gray, and even went so far as to offer to find a publisher for the *Specimens*. That Percy's interest in Welsh literature led him to write to Lewis Morris is clear from the preceding note.

² Exception must be made of the sword *Trifungus*, which, in spite of Gray's efforts was introduced from the Norse.

a mythology which had hitherto been almost wholly neglected by English dramatists. Everyone knows what a prolific writer Mason was, and his careless method of composition has always been a source of amusement to men of letters; floundering about in the unsounded depths of Celtic antiquities, he would surely have come to grief had it not been for the ceaseless efforts of his painstaking friend and critic, Gray. During the three years in which *Caractacus* was being written Gray wrote letter after letter offering help (which was always accepted), making suggestions, and pointing out as tactfully as possible the absurdities into which Mason's ignorance so often led him.¹ So far as we can judge by his letters, Gray was much more interested in *Caractacus* than he ever was in his own "Bard"; in fact, a really fair title for the poem would be "Caractacus, a Dramatic Poem, Undertaken by William Mason and Carefully Revised by Thomas Gray." An examination of the extant letters of criticism shows that whatever merit the poem possesses is largely due to the efforts of Gray.

Although *Caractacus* was seriously underrated by its first critics,² nevertheless, the strange, wild beauty of the Druidical elements

¹ These letters are too long and too numerous to quote at length here, but the important ones may now easily be found by reference to the Index of Gray's *Letters*, s.v. "Mason." There are seventeen still extant, and in many Gray goes into the most minute detail. As an example, I quote the opening of his well-known letter of January 13, 1758:

"DEAR MASON,

Why you make no more of writing an Ode, and throwing it into the fire, than of buckling and unbuckling your shoe. I have never read Keyssler's book, nor you neither, I believe; if you had taken that pains, I am persuaded you would have seen that his Celtic and his septentrional antiquities are two things entirely distinct. There are, indeed, some learned persons who have taken pains to confound what Caesar and Tacitus have taken pains to separate, the old Druidical or Celtic belief, and that of the old Germans, but nobody has been so learned as to mix the Celtic religion with that of the Goths. Why, Woden himself is supposed not to have been older than Julius Caesar; but let him have lived when he pleases, it is certain that neither he nor his Valhalla were heard of till many ages after. This is the doctrine of the Scalds, not of the Bards; these are the songs of Hengist and Horsa, a modern new-fangled belief in comparison of that which you ought to possess. . . ."

For a criticism of other early Romanticists who confused Celtic and Teutonic mythology, see the Index of Professor Farley's *Scandinavian Influences*, s.v. "Celtic."

² The critic in the *Monthly Review* for June, 1759, entirely failed to realize the importance to English literature of Mason's extensive use of Celtic mythology; at the time, the second edition was already out, yet the comment is almost entirely on the lack of dramatic action. In July of the same year a brief synopsis of the poem was printed in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, but again the reviewer had no inkling of the part *Caractacus* was to play in making the average reader familiar with the essentials of Druidism. The attitude of the *Critical Review* was even more absurd.

immediately caught the public eye and aroused great enthusiasm. Some idea of its early vogue may be had from the fact that two editions appeared in 1759, and others in 1762, 1764, 1776,¹ and 1777; it was also included in Vol. XXXI of Bell's *British Theatre* and in the eleven editions of Mason's poems which were published between 1764 and 1811. It was adapted for stage presentation in 1776 and was played fourteen times at Covent Garden; it reappeared two years later at the same theater, and was performed at the Felsted School, Essex, in 1785.² Still further evidence of the poem's popularity is afforded by the fact that it was translated into Greek, Latin, French, and Italian,³ and was frequently imitated throughout the rest of the eighteenth century.⁴

III. GRAY AND MACPHERSON

Limitations of space make it impossible to do more than refer in passing to a matter of the greatest importance—the relation of Gray to the Ossianic poems of James Macpherson. Briefly, Gray's influence was felt in two ways: first, his poem "The Bard" seems to have been one of the chief sources of inspiration that led Macpherson to begin writing *Ossian*; secondly, Gray's favorable comments on Macpherson's earliest Ossianic efforts must have added very considerably to the enthusiasm with which they were received by a host of Gray's literary friends. Since it is impossible to produce all the evidence here, it may be well to quote Mr. Smart's phrasing of the generally accepted view of Macpherson's direct indebtedness to "The Bard": "His case is the stranger because Gray, had he looked into *Ossian* with sufficient detachment, might have found there the influence of his own muse. It cannot be said that had 'The Bard' not been published—it appeared in 1757—there would have been no *Ossian*; but *Ossian* at least would have been somewhat different."⁵ The same opinion has been expressed with equal force by Mr. Tovey,

¹ The lyrical part only.

² The facts about the production at Covent Garden are from Genest's *English Stage*; that it was played at the Felsted School in 1785 appears from p. 475 of the *Gentleman's Magazine* for that year, where we read: "Prologue to *Caractacus*. By Mr. Tooke, a Youth of Sixteen. Acted at the Felsted-School, Essex, April 16, 1785."

³ All these translations are to be found in the British Museum.

⁴ Several of these imitations are noted in the last section of this article.

⁵ *James Macpherson*, by J. S. Smart, p. 101.

and the case admits of convincing (though necessarily detailed) demonstration.

In regard to the second point, it may be said that in spite of Gray's doubts as to the genuineness of *Ossian*, he never failed to express unbounded admiration of its poetic value. He corresponded for some time with Macpherson¹ and was one of the distinguished critics who saw some of the *Fragments* in MS before their publication in June, 1760. It has always been known in a general way that Gray's approval did much to add to the early popularity of these pieces, but attention has not, I believe, been called to the fact that an anonymous metrical version of Fragment V, contributed to the *Scots Magazine* as early as July, 1760, was, as a matter of course, given the significant subtitle, "A piece in the taste of the celebrated Mr. Gray." It is only from a study of such incidental testimony as this, that we can come to understand how important a part Gray played in the Celtic revival.

IV. GRAY AND EVAN EVANS

I have said that Gray derived much of his information about Welsh poetry from Evan Evans, but it must be understood that this particular influence was not felt until after "The Bard" had been published. As the relation of these two writers is baffling, and as most of Gray's editors have been in doubt about the source of "The Bard," it seems well to treat the problem of chronology with some detail.² The essential facts are these:

¹ This correspondence seems to be no longer extant, but it is evident from what Gray wrote to Thomas Wharton in June, 1760, that several letters were exchanged:

"If you have seen Stonhewer he has probably told you of my old Scotch (or rather Irish) poetry. I am gone mad about them. they are said to be translation (literal & in prose) from the *Erse*-tongue, done by one Macpherson, a young Clergyman in the Highlands. he means to publish a Collection he has of these specimens of antiquity, if it be antiquity: but what plagues me is, I cannot come at any certainty on that head. I was so struck, so *extasié* with their infinite beauty, that I writ into Scotland to make a thousand enquiries. The letters I have in return are ill-wrote, ill-reasoned, unsatisfactory, calculated (one would imagine) to deceive one, & yet not cunning enough to do it cleverly. in short, the whole external evidence would make one believe these fragments (for so he calls them, tho' nothing can be more entire) counterfeit: but the internal is so strong on the other side, that I am resolved to believe them genuine, spite of the Devil & the Kirk. It is impossible to convince me, that they were invented by the same Man, that writes me these letters."

Compare also the letter of August 7, 1760, where Gray says of these same *Fragments*: "I have one (from Mr. Macpherson) which he has not printed."

² Since the material for this article was gathered, I find that several of the facts about Gray and Evans have been brought to light by Professor W. Lewis Jones

From Vol. II of Carte's *History of England* Gray got all his information about the tradition of the massacre of the Welsh Bards by Edward I.¹ Carte in turn, as he tells us in a note, derived the story from Sir John Wynn[e]'s *History of the Gwedir Family*, a work not published till 1770 but accessible to him in MS in the Mostyn library. Of so much we may be absolutely certain. It seems safe to add that some of the imagery in "The Bard" was taken from the Norse poem which Gray later translated, using Bartholin's Latin version, as "The Fatal Sisters."² Evans' "Dissertation on the

(*Y Beirniad*, Vol. II, No. 1; compare note 2, p. 1 above). Because his essay is in Welsh, is not very comprehensive, and seems to take no account of Evans' unpublished letters in Additional MS 32,330, I venture to cover some of the same ground.

¹ *The Massacre of the Welsh Bards*. The early editors of Gray's poems had nothing to say about the specific source of "The Bard." In 1894 Professor Phelps conjectured that "Gray may have met with" the tradition in Carte's *History of England*, II, 196 (*Selections from the Poetry and Prose of Thomas Gray*, p. 157). Mr. Tovey (Pitt Press edition, p. 205) said without any assurance: "Dr. Phelps thinks Gray may have found this tradition in the second volume of Carte's *History of England*, which was published in 1750." Of course there need not be the slightest doubt about the matter, as is obvious from the correspondence of Evans with Bishop Percy. Three brief quotations make the matter clear:

PERCY TO EVANS. JULY 21, 1761

"PS. I am told you are acquainted with Mr. Gray the Poet: pray has he any foundation for what he has asserted in his Ode on the British Bard, viz., 'That there is a tradition among the inhabitants of Wales, that our Edward 1st destroyed all the British Bards that fell into his hands'? The existence of the tradition has been questioned."

EVANS TO PERCY. AUGUST 8, 1761

"I have not the happiness to be acquainted with Mr. Gray. It is very true that Edward the first destroyed the Welsh Bards, for I find it particularly mentioned in the history of the House of Gwydir in the county of Carnarvon, written by Sir John Wynne Bart. in the time of Queen Eliz. who was a descendant in a direct line from the last princes of Wales, and a person well versed in the British history in general, and in that of his own family in particular. I have a manuscript of this history by me. These are his words. . . ." [Here follows the very extract from Wynne which Carte had cited in his *History*.]

PERCY TO EVANS. OCTOBER 15, 1761

"Soon after I received your letter, I was down at Cambridge, where I had the good fortune to meet with Mr. Gray, the poet: and spent an afternoon with him at his Chambers.—Our discourse turned on you and the Welsh Poetry: I shewed him your Letter, and he desired leave to transcribe the passage relating to K. Edward's massacre of the Welsh bards.—All the authority he had before, it seems, was only a hint in Carte's History. He seemed very glad of this authentic report."

These three quotations are from Folios 13, 17, and 26 respectively, of Additional MS 32,330. The first and third have already been printed in the second edition of Evans' *Specimens* (Llanidloes, 1862). For a study of the origin and spread of the tradition, references are given in Professor Phelps's *Selections*, p. 157.

² There can be little doubt that Gray was, by 1755, familiar with Bartholin's work and was strongly influenced by it in writing "The Bard." One of his notes to the 1768 edition suggests as much, and the fact has been hinted at by Johnson in his *Life of Gray* (cited by Professor Beers in *A History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 196); by Sayers (*Disquisitions Metaphysical and Literary*, cited by Professor Farley in *Scandinavian Influences*, p. 202); by Edward Williams, better known as Iolo Morganwg

Bards" (which was the first part of the *Specimens* to be written) is first heard of in a letter dated October 12, 1759¹—more than two years after "The Bard" had been in print. A single bit of Evans' Welsh poetry reached Gray shortly before April 23, 1760, but the "Dissertation" proper was not shown to him until after that date—probably in May of the same year.² Gray was expected, according to Evans' own statement, to "correct" the "Dissertation," and that he took a great interest is clear from the correspondence of Percy and Evans. "The Bard" thus entirely antedates the *Specimens*, and instead of Gray's borrowing from Evans, it was the Welshman who first asked to have his work corrected by Gray. Further, it was under the direct influence of "The Bard" that Evans wrote a rather remarkable paraphrase of Psalm 137—one of his few English poems—which is here quoted:

A PARAPHRASE OF THE 137TH PSALM. ALLUDING TO THE CAPTIVITY AND
TREATMENT OF THE WELSH BARDS BY KING EDWARD I

Sad near the willowy Thames we stood,
And curs'd the inhospitable flood;
Tears such as patients weep, 'gan flow,
The silent eloquence of woe,
5 When Cambria rushed into our mind,
And pity with just vengeance joined;
Vengeance to injured Cambria due,
And pity, O ye Bards, to you.

(*Poems, Lyric and Pastoral*, 1794, II, 195). But the facts were first clearly stated and the evidence summed up by Mr. Tovey (Pitt Press edition, pp. 212–13). His summary seems adequate, yet it may be supplemented by noting Gray's letter of March 24, 1758, where he again discusses the question of mingling Celtic and Teutonic mythology "in a time of dearth."

¹ *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* (London, 1764). This work, to which reference has so often been made, played a very considerable part in the English Romantic movement. As the volume is now rare, a brief description may be given: it consists of a Latin *Dissertatio de Bardis*, a number of literal translations into English prose from the Welsh classics, and the original Welsh versions of these poems. The letter of October 12, 1759 (*Gwaith Ieuan Brydydd Hir*, ed. D. S. Evans, pp. 162–63), shows that Evans originally planned the "Dissertation" for a volume of poems by Goronwy Owen; but being encouraged by Percy, Gray, Justice Barrington, and others, he added greatly to it and incorporated the whole in his volume, *Specimens*.

² In his letter of April 23, 1760, Evans says (*Gwaith Ieuan Brydydd Hir*, pp. 164–65) that Gray admires Gwalchmai's "Ode to Owen Gwynedd," and that Justice Barrington will show the "Dissertation" to Gray "to have his judgment of it and to correct it where necessary." In June Gray wrote to Wharton: "The Welch Poets are also coming to light: I have seen a Discourse in MS about them (by one Mr. Evans, a Clergyman) with specimens of their writings" (*Letters*, ed. Tovey, II, 146).

10 Silent, neglected, and unstrung,
 Our harps upon the willows hung,
 That, softly sweet in Cambrian measures,
 Used to sooth our souls to pleasures,
 When, lo, the insulting foe appears,
 And bid[s] us dry our useless tears.

15 "Resume your harps," the Saxons cry,
 "And change your grief to songs of joy;
 Such strains as old Taliesin sang,
 What time your native mountains rang
 With his wild notes, and all around
 20 Seas, rivers, woods return'd the sound."

 What!—shall the Saxons hear us sing,
 Or their dull vales with Cambrian music ring?
 No—let old Conway cease to flow,
 Back to her source Sabrina go:
 25 Let huge Plinlimmon hide his head,
 Or let the tyrant strike me dead,
 If I attempt to raise a song
 Unmindful of my country's wrong.
 What!—shall a haughty king command
 30 Cambrians' free strain on Saxon land?
 May this right arm first wither'd be,
 Ere I may touch one string to thee,
 Proud monarch; nay, may instant death
 Arrest my tongue and stop my breath,
 35 If I attempt to weave a song,
 Regardless of my country's wrong!

 Thou God of vengeance, dost thou sleep,
 When thy insulted Druids weep,
 The Victor's jest,¹ the Saxon's scorn,
 40 Unheard, unpitied, and forlorn?
 Bare thy right arm, thou God of ire,
 And set their vaunted towers on fire.
 Remember our inhuman foes,
 When the first Edward furious rose,

¹ I have inserted this comma, in the hope of making sense out of the passage. But it seems as if lines 39 and 40 had been transposed and that we should read:

Thou God of vengeance, dost thou sleep,
 When thy insulted Druids weep
 Unheard, unpitied, and forlorn
 The Victor's jest, the Saxon's scorn?

As this poem is found in the appendix to the second edition of the *Specimens* (1762), a very carelessly edited volume, some such blunder was probably made.

- 45 And, like a whirlwind's rapid sway,
Swept armies, cities, Bards away.
- "High on a rock o'er Conway's flood"
The last surviving poet stood,
And curs'd the tyrant, as he pass'd
- 50 With cruel pomp and murderous haste.
What now avail our tuneful strains,
Midst savage taunts and galling chains?
Say, will the lark imprison'd sing
So sweet, as when, on towering wing,
- 55 He wakes the songsters of the sky,
And tunes his notes to liberty?
Ah no, the Cambrian lyre no more
Shall sweetly sound on Arvon's shore,
No more the silver harp be won,
- 60 Ye Muses, by your favourite son;
Or I, even I, by glory fir'd,
Had to the honour'd prize aspir'd.
No more shall Mona's oaks be spar'd
Or Druid circle be rever'd.
- 65 On Conway's banks, and Menai's streams
The solitary bittern screams;
And, where was erst Llewelyn's court,
Ill-omened birds and wolves resort.
There oft at midnight's silent hour,
- 70 Near yon ivy-mantled tower,
By the glow-worm's twinkling fire,
Tuning his romantic lyre,
Gray's pale spectre seems to sing,
"Ruin seize thee, ruthless King."

The borrowings from "The Bard," especially in lines 25, 47, 66, and 75, will be seen at a glance, all the more readily because Evans himself has put the important ones in quotation marks. Gray, in turn, was wholly indebted to Evans' *Specimens* for the originals of "Owen," "Hoel," "Caradoc," and "Conan," which he put into English verse. We now see that in writing "The Bard" and helping Evans with his *Specimens*, Gray had only been casting his bread upon the waters. We may sum up the relation of the two men thus:

1755-57. Gray wrote "The Bard," taking his Celtic material from Carte's *History* (no influence from Evans).

1759-64. Evans worked on his *Specimens*, assisted by Gray; also wrote, in imitation of "The Bard," his "Paraphrase of the 137th Psalm" (date unknown).

1760 or later. From the English and Latin versions in the *Specimens* (published in 1764 but seen in MS), Gray versified "Owen," "Hoel," "Caradoc," and "Conan." The first of these four poems was printed by Gray in 1768, the others by Mason in 1775.

V. GRAY AND THE MINOR POETS OF THE CELTIC REVIVAL

We may now turn to the influence exerted by Gray's Celtic poems and by *Caractacus*, of which he was almost joint author, on some of the minor writers of the late eighteenth century. Out of the multitude who took part in the movement and who were probably affected to some extent by Gray, I have selected a few whose indebtedness is most obvious. The list makes no pretense to completeness,¹ but it does show that a surprising interest in Celtic matters, particularly in Druidical mythology, was taken as a direct result of Gray's influence. As might be expected, the verse varies from good to very bad, and the few examples here quoted are fairly representative.

Early in the year 1760² James Foot was writing his *Penseroso, or the Pensive Philosopher*, a long didactic poem showing a strong influence from "the elegant Mr. Mason," whom the author mentions in the Preface. Beginning on p. 161 is a passage dealing with Druidism, the subject probably having been suggested by Mason's poem of the previous year; certainly the following lines are borrowed from the opening speech of *Caractacus*:

High on this hill, and down yon craggy steep
Delv'd into caves, wide-spreading rose the oaks
Gloomy as night, the consecrated haunt
Of ancient Druids: on each father tree,
Each father tree a wood, so broad his arms,
Fair hung the Mis[t]letoe like burnish'd gold
Of mystic pow'r, and glitter'd through the shade.

¹ The writer is now gathering material for a detailed study of the whole period 1750-1800, showing the Celtic influences in the works of Blake, Brooke, Bruce, Cowper, etc. The volume when published may aspire to be a humble companion to Professor Farley's admirable *Scandinavian Influences in the English Romantic Movement*.

² Published at London, 1771; for the date of composition, see the author's note on p. 251.

Deep-scoop'd and shagg'd with boughs yon ran the cave
 Beneath the mountain's brow, where dark-immur'd
 And held a God, the Seer of Druids liv'd,
 His white-rob'd brotherhood in neighbouring shades
 At awful distance seated.¹

Another item of interest was the appearance in 1764 of the anonymous *Temple of Tragedy*, a poem of some length, whose unknown author tells us that he has taken his Celtic touches from *Caractacus*.² Though the piece is little known today, its publication aroused considerable interest, and the free use of Mason's material amused Gray so much that he jocosely claimed the authorship himself, writing to Mason: "I did not write any of the elegies [on Churchill], being busy in writing the *Temple of Tragedy*. Send for it forthwith, for you are highly interested in it. If I had not owned the thing, perhaps you might have gone and taken it for the Reverend Mr. Langhorne's. It is divine."³

One of the first and least important imitations of Gray's "Bard" was Richard Polwhele's "Cambrian Bards: an Ode Written about the Age of Seventeen."⁴ Another, "The Complaint of Cambria," by Edward Lovibond, contains the following tribute to the Welsh Bards massacred by Edward I:

Revere thy Cambria's flowing tongue!
 Tho' high-born Hoel's lips are dumb,
 Cadwallo's harp no more is strung,
 And silence sits on soft Lluellyn's tomb.

¹ From p. 162. It is not without interest to see that Foot, writing so early in the Celtic revival, felt called on to explain his reference to Druidism in the following delightfully naïve note:

"Of the Druids there were three orders, the Druids properly so called, the Euvates, and the Bardi. It is very certain, that they dealt in human sacrifices, and believed in the doctrines of the conflagration [!] and transmigration of souls. They are supposed to have derived their religion from the Magi. Those of Britain were the most celebrated for their learning, and for the great respect and honour which they received from the world. The accounts we have of them from history are very short, being almost lost in the wilds of time. It is certain also, that they taught some great and useful truths; but, whether they addicted themselves to all the idolatry and superstition of the other Gentiles, is not here determined. The intent of this book is to expose the wickedness and folly of idolatry in general, but not merely that of the Druids in particular; and a liberty is herein assumed of embellishing this account of the matter, with such circumstances as are in part true from history, and partly probable" (p. 198).

² See *The Temple of Tragedy*, p. 2.

³ *Letters*, ed. Tovey, III, 59.

⁴ Polwhele was born in 1760, so we may date this production about 1777. It is found in Vol. II of Polwhele's *Poems* (London, 1810).

O sing thy sires in genuine strains!
 When Rome's resistless arm prevail'd,
 When Edward delug'd all my plains,¹
 And all the music of my mountains fail'd;
 When all her flames Rebellion spread,
 Firmly they stood—O sing the dead!²

An anonymous Latin version of "The Bard" published at Chester³ in 1775 is preceded by an English metrical "Dedication to the Genius of Antient Britain," which contains many phrases taken direct from Gray's poem. Similarly, Thomas Penrose's poem "The Harp" was so strongly influenced by "The Bard" that it amounts to a selective paraphrase.⁴ And the fact that several passages in Rogers' "Ode to Superstition" were "evidently inspired by Gray's 'Bard'" has already been pointed out in Clayden's *Early Life of Samuel Rogers*.⁵

Of considerably more interest than these are Mathias' *Runic Odes. Imitated from the Norse Tongue. In the Manner of Mr. Gray* (1781), of which the fourth and fifth odes, notwithstanding the misleading title, are not Norse but Celtic. The fifth ode, "Tudor," is especially noteworthy, being an adaptation of some passages in Evans' *Specimens*; the meter, it will be seen, is the same that Gray had already used in "Owen," "Hoel," "Caradoc," and "Conan." For this poem, then, Gray set the style and suggested the meter; Evans gave the actual material; while Macpherson furnished the reference in the second stanza to Malvina.

ODE V

TUDOR

Fill the horn of glossy blue,
 Ocean's bright caerulean hue;
 Briskly quaff the flav'rous mead,
 'Tis a day to joy decreed.

¹ Lovibond here notes: "Edward I put to death all the Welch Bards."

² From *Poems on Several Occasions. By the late Edward Lovibond* (London, 1785); the author died in 1775.

³ Not to be confused with the Latin version by "E. B. G.," which was published at Cambridge in the same year.

⁴ Penrose's poems were published posthumously in 1781, the date of his death being 1779. For a favorable review of the volume and a biography of Penrose, see the *European Magazine* for March, 1782, p. 202.

⁵ Cited, with more pertinent information on the relation of Gray to Rogers, by Professor Farley (*Scandinavian Influences*, p. 188 and note).

Strike the harp's symphonious string,
 Tudor none refuse to sing;
 Ne'er shall he belie his birth,
 Valour his, and conscious worth.

Have you seen the virgin snow,
 That tops old Aran's peering brow;
 Or lucid web, by insect spun,
 Purpureal gleam in summer sun?
 With such, yet far diviner light,
 Malvina hits the dazzled sight;
 The guerdon such, can Tudor's breast
 Dare to court ignoble rest?

From the cliff sublime and hoary
 See descending martial glory;
 Armed bands aloft uprear
 Crimson banner, crimson spear;
 Venodotia's ancient boast,
 Meets the pride of London's host;
 On they move with step serene,
 And form a dreadly pleasing scene.

Heard you that terrific clang?
 Thro' the pathless void it rang:
 Th' expecting raven screams afar,
 And snuffs the reeking spoils of war.
 Have you e'er on barren strand
 Ta'en your solitary stand,
 And seen the whirlwind's spirit sped
 O'er the dark-green billowy bed?
 Glowing in the thickest fight,
 Such resistless Tudor's might.¹

In the same year, 1781, John Pinkerton published his volume of *Rimes*,² conspicuous in the Celtic revival for the beautiful poems about Ossian. The following lines from "The Vale of Woe, after the Gaelic Manner":

Heard ye not the raven scream?
 Saw ye not the sable stream?
 Heard ye not the bleak wind blow
 Adown the vale of woe?

¹ From pp. 25-26 of the first edition. Mathias explains at length that this poem was suggested by certain passages in Evans' *Specimens*, which he quotes.

²A second edition appeared in 1782.

are strongly reminiscent of Gray's fragment from the Welsh:

Have ye seen the tusky boar,
Or the bull with sullen roar,
On surrounding foes advance?
So Caradoc bore his lance.

Yet, after all, it may be unwise to argue that because of the striking similarity in metrical swing there is a direct imitation; the question may well be left open.

In that remarkable treatise on Welsh music, poetry, and Bardism in general—Edward Jones's *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards*¹ (1784)—the influence of Gray's Celtic interests may again be seen. The frontispiece is an engraving, after Louthembourg, of the hero of Gray's poem, standing, harp in hand, far above the army of Edward I; and under the picture are the following lines:

On a rock, whose haughty brow
Frowns o'er old Conway's foaming flood,
Robed in the sable garb of woe,
With haggard eyes the Poet stood;
(Loose his beard, and hoary hair
Stream'd, like a meteor, to the troubled air)
And with a Master's hand, and Prophet's fire,
Struck the deep sorrows of his lyre.

On p. 4 are Gray's three versifications from the *Gododin*, while on p. 1 is a short quotation from *Caractacus*.

Six years later Frank Sayers published his *Dramatic Sketches of Northern Mythology*. The merit of these poems is too well known to need extended comment,² but a study is yet to be made of the exact relation of the Celtic tragedy *Starvo* to its prototype *Caractacus*. A comparison of the two works would show very considerable borrowings by Sayers, who pays the following tribute to Mason in his introduction:

The story of the following Tragedy, like that of the foregoing, is fictitious, but I hope not entirely inconsistent with the manners and customs of the

¹ The second edition, greatly enlarged, appeared in 1794, the third in 1808, and the fourth in 1825. The statement in the *DNB* that the third edition appeared in 1812 is an error. A copy of the first edition (now very rare) is in the British Museum; all the other editions, as well as a unique collection of Jones's other volumes, are to be found in the National Library of Wales, at Aberystwyth.

² They had reached a fourth edition by 1807.

Celtic people. As the scene of the action is laid in Britain, I have been obliged to desert the mythology of the Saxons for the institutions and ceremonies of the druids; some of these ceremonies have already been received by the public with delight, as displayed in the admirable tragedy of *Caractacus*. . . .

Shortly after the appearance of the *Dramatic Sketches*, George Richards wrote his Oxford prize poem "The Aboriginal Britons"¹ (1791), a brilliant eulogy on the ancient Celts, and one of the few pieces sincerely praised by Byron in his *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers*. For the present study the poem's chief interest lies in its debt to *Caractacus*, which is frequently acknowledged in the notes. Richards' second Celtic effort, the *Songs of the Aboriginal Bards of Britain* (1792), has on its title-page a quotation from *Caractacus*. Throughout the first of the two poems in this little volume Richards borrowed so freely from Gray's "Bard" that he deemed it necessary to add a note calling attention to his slight changes of Gray's imagery; while the other, "The Captivity of Caractacus," owes even more to the dramatic poem of 1759.

Perhaps the most astonishing result of Gray's influence on the Celtic revival was the production in 1798 of James Boaden's historical play *Cambro-Britons*.² The general subject is the invasion of Wales by Edward I, which alone would be enough to make us suspect that the author's inspiration had come from Gray. But this is not all; Act III, scene 5, of *Cambro-Britons* is from beginning to end simply a dramatization of "The Bard," with the omission of the long prophecy. And as Genest justly remarks, this is the best scene in the play.

CAMBRO-BRITONS, ACT III, SCENE 5

(The scene changes to a narrow pass, along which the King's army must march. A rough and angry torrent bounds it in front, overhung by inaccessible crags. The drum of the invading army is heard and louder as they approach. At the moment when the King attended enters upon the stage, with a hideous yell, the Bards rush to the verge of the cliffs, and with haggard forms, seen only by the glare of the torches they carry, like furies pour out their execrations on his head, in a full chorus to the harp only.)

¹ Practically the whole poem is quoted, with unbounded praise, in S. J. Pratt's *Gleanings in England*, of which various editions appeared at the end of the century.

² Published at London in 1798. Genest, in his *History of the English Stage*, says that it was acted twelve times, the first performance being on July 21 at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket.

CHORUS

Ruin seize thee, ruthless King!
 Havock choak thy furious way!
 Desolation's raven wing
 Sweep thee from the eye of day!
 Ruin seize thee, ruthless King.
 Ruin seize thee, ruthless King.

HEREFORD

Say, what are these?—The spirits of the mountain
 Yelling amid the storm!

MORTIMER

Despair sustain me!—
 To arms!

HEREFORD

Behold, my lord! from forth the band
 One rushes on—and, by the sudden silence,
 Prepares to speak. Th' undaunted king advances!

1ST BARD

Edward, I call thee! if thou dar'st, then hear me.
 Would I could add the eagle's piercing scream,
 And all the savage sounds that awe the desert,
 To thunder on thee—tyrant, persecutor—
 Cool, unrelenting, bloody ravager!—
 Behold the last remains of that high race
 Thy policy has butchered! . . .

[The 1st Bard continues this execration for 22 lines more, interrupted only by the chorus—"Ruin seize thee, ruthless King."]

KING EDWARD

I'll bear no longer! To your arms, my friends!
 Let not these haggard wretches thus dismay ye!
 Silence the race forever!

(Charge sounded.—The soldiers rush out.—The Bards, all but the principal one, fly.—The woods are seen to take fire in the distance.)

1ST BARD

That I laugh at.
 He who dares die is master of the means.
 My fate is plac'd beyond thee. Think not, king,
 The generous stream that beats here shall embathe
 A ruffian's falchion.—I hear the groans
 Of my dear dying friends!—Their parting breath
 Shrieks curses on thee!—May it fall like mist,

And deadly vapours poison all around thee!—
 Hark! the last feeble wail!—and now all's silent.
 See, where their thin shades flit among the clouds!—
 Behold! They beckon me! and thus I join them.—

(*He flings himself into the torrent below him, and with the sound of trumpets the scene drops.*)

Another drama on the same subject was written by William Sotheby, *The Cambrian Hero, or Llewelyn the Great*.¹ Here again we have such lines as the following adapted from Gray's "Bard":

Llewelyn rouse, and strike the blow,
 Let ruin seize th' invading foe;
 Then glory on thy banners wait,
 Recording fame thy deeds relate.

Mention must also be made of *The Heroine of Cambria* (1811) by William Hayley, who had already paid his respects to the Celtic poems of Gray and Mason in his metrical *Essay on Epic Poetry*.² This drama, too, is based on the tradition that Edward I caused the Welsh Bards to be massacred—the same tradition that had been brought into such prominence more than fifty years before by Gray's immortal "Bard."

To this list of poems deriving their inspiration wholly or in part from the work of Gray, one might add several anonymous pieces of some importance.³ And still further evidence may be found by examining the quotations and references in the countless *Tours through Wales* that were published late in the century. H. P. Wyndham, for example, wrote of the massacre of the Welsh Bards by Edward I:

If some should regret the poems, the existence of which the massacre obstructed, they may find some comfort in the reflection that it has given birth to one of the finest odes in the English tongue, the merit of which, alone, would probably surpass the ponderous volumes of all those that might have been written in the British language.⁴

So, too, Joseph Cradock:

. . . for though Mona is destroyed and her Altars abolished,—though

¹ The volume is not dated, but it appeared ca. 1800.

² See Hayley's *Essay on Epic Poetry: in five epistles to the Rev. Mr. Mason* (London, 1782), *passim*, especially p. 113, where *Caractacus* is specifically mentioned.

³ Such as the "Ode to the Lyric Muse" (*Scots Magazine*, February, 1765); "A Poetical Chronology" by "T. M., Esq." (*Gentleman's Magazine*, September, 1773); "Elegy on Gray" by "N" in *Poems, Chiefly by Gentlemen of Devonshire and Cornwall* (1792).

⁴ *A Tour through Monmouthshire and Wales* (second edition, 1781), p. 149.

Fires have consumed her Groves, and her Priests have perished by the Sword, yet like the Phoenix, she rises more glorious from Decay; her Ashes have given Birth to the Caractacus of Mason, and the Fate of her Bards to the Inspiration of Gray.¹

Equally appreciative are the words of S. J. Pratt:

Neither shall I say any thing of Snowdon—nor ask you to accompany me to the country, where "Huge Plinlimmon rears his cloud-topp'd head." Both of which have been introduced to you in the best manner, by Mason and Gray, the latter of whom possessed a genius loftier, and more sublime, than the mountains he described.²

In tracing throughout the foregoing pages the influence of Gray's Celtic researches, we have simply been writing a chapter in the history of the great eighteenth-century Celtic revival. An equally important chapter could be written on the English poetry derived from Evans' *Specimens*, and an even longer one on the imitations of *Ossian*. And it has been shown that in following these later developments, we should still be dealing with the influence of the author of "The Bard." Until the whole history is written, no exact estimate can be made of the importance of the Celtic poetry that then appeared; whether it contributed as much to the progress of the Romantic movement as did the Norse revival or the Ballad revival remains to be seen. But, however important this Celtic movement may have been to English literature, it certainly was dominated by the personality of the greatest poet and most careful scholar of the day—Thomas Gray. His own Celtic production was meager; but the influence of the man who wrote the "Elegy" and declined the laureateship was in no way dependent on quantity. His information was derived from a large number of sources; his influence was diffused through an even greater number of channels.

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¹ *An Account of some of the most Romantic Parts of North Wales* (1777), p. 64.

² *Gleanings through Wales* (3d ed., 1797), I, 43-44. See also: the Introduction of William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales* (published 1782, 5th ed. in 1800); Richard Warner, *Walk through Wales in August 1797*, pp. 33, 84 (where he has printed "cloud-clapt" for Gray's "cloud-topp'd"), and 155-56; Warner, *Second Walk through Wales in August and September 1798*, p. 43; Robert Potter, *Inquiry into Some Passages in Dr. Johnson's Lives of the Poets* (London, 1783), p. 30, where "The Bard" is called "the grandest and sublimest effort of the Lyric Muse," John Scott of Amwell concurred in all that Potter has said in praise of "The Bard" (*Critical Essays*, 1785, pp. 243 ff.). Such testimony can be multiplied almost indefinitely.